February 1936

ON THE NOTION OF AN ELITE

We have often had occasion to point out the linguistic abuses characteristic of our time, which are among the clearest symptoms of the disorder and confusion that reign everywhere: it sometimes seems that words have completely lost their meaning, so frequently are they used in senses that have nothing in common with what they should normally signify. This is why we always strive to return as closely as possible to the original meaning, for this is, in short, the only way to restore to language the accuracy and precision of which it is capable; but we recognize that, like anything that goes against certain habits, this cannot be done without some precautions, and that in such cases, it is always necessary to provide all the necessary explanations to avoid more or less unfortunate misunderstandings.

Sometimes, these common distortions of the meaning of words take on a veritable air of caricature and parody; We have pointed this out elsewhere, particularly with regard to words such as “tradition” and “religion,” the former applied to customs devoid of any real value or transcendent content, and the latter to manifestations of the most banal human sentimentality. Even the word “initiation,” which should be used more strictly because of the domain to which it refers, is not immune to this kind of distortion, since some use it to designate the rudimentary teaching of some kind of “knowledge,” and it even appears at the beginning of works that, in fact, amount to nothing more than the lowest form of “popularization.” There is not even the word “adept,” the exclusive title of those who have reached the highest degree of initiation, which has not, through a confusion even stranger and more inexplicable than all others, come to qualify the simple adherents of anything, even the most profane of associations. 1 It is again on an abuse of the same kind that we wish to draw attention now, because

we have had to observe it more and more frequently for some time, and because moreover it is a word which we ourselves have used quite often in its true sense, without thinking it useful then to insist on all that separates this from those false conceptions which had not yet appeared to us as so widespread, and which perhaps really were not yet, for all this is visibly getting worse more and more rapidly. This word is “elite,” which we used to designate something that no longer exists in the current state of the Western world, and whose constitution, or rather reconstitution, appeared to us as the primary and essential condition for intellectual recovery and a restoration of tradition. Now, however, it happens that, at every moment and from all sides, we hear talk not of the elite in this sense, but of “elites,” a term used to encompass all individuals who surpass the “average” in any field of activity whatsoever, even the most inferior and the most devoid of any intellectual capacity. First, let us note that the plural form is entirely nonsensical here: even without straying from a purely lay perspective, one could already say that this word is one of those that cannot be pluralized, because its meaning is, in a way, that of a “superlative,” or because it implies the idea of something that, by its very nature, is incapable of fragmenting and subdividing; but, for our purposes, it is necessary to appeal here to some other, deeper considerations.

Sometimes, for greater precision and to avoid any possible misunderstanding, we have used the expression “intellectual elite”; But, in truth, there is almost a pleonasm here, for it is inconceivable that the elite could be anything other than intellectual, or, if you prefer, spiritual—these two words being essentially equivalent for us, since we absolutely refuse to confuse true intellectuality with “rationality.” The reason for this is that the distinction that defines the elite can, by definition, only be made “from above,” that is, in relation to the highest possibilities of being; and this is easily understood by reflecting a little on the proper meaning of the word, as it results directly from its etymology.

Indeed, from a strictly traditional point of view, what gives the word “elite” its full value is that it is derived from “chosen”; and this, let us

state clearly, is precisely what led us to use it as we have, in preference to any other. But we still need to clarify a little more how this should be understood. We shouldn't stop at the religious and exoteric sense, which is undoubtedly the one in which we most commonly speak of the "elect," although this is certainly something that could easily lend itself to an analogical transposition appropriate to what is actually at stake; but there is something else, an indication of which can even be found in the well-known and often-quoted, but perhaps insufficiently understood, Gospel passage: "Many are called, but few are chosen."

Essentially, we could say that the elite, as we understand it, represents all those who possess the "qualifications" required for initiation, and who are naturally always a minority among humankind; in a sense, all are "called," because of the "central" position that human beings occupy in this state of existence, but there are few "elect," and, under the conditions of the present age, there are certainly fewer than ever. One might object that this elite always exists, by the very nature of things, because, however few those who are "qualified" may be, there are nevertheless at least some, and besides, here, the number matters little; this is true, but they thus represent only a virtual elite, or, one might say, the possibility of an elite, and, for this elite to be effectively constituted, they themselves must first become aware of their "qualification." Furthermore, it must be clearly understood that, as we have already explained, initiatory "qualifications" are not all exclusively intellectual, but also involve the consideration of other elements; but this does not change what we have said about the definition of the elite, since, whatever these "qualifications" may be in themselves, they must always be considered with a view to an essentially intellectual or spiritual realization, and this is where their sole purpose lies.

Normally, all those who are thus "qualified" should, by that very fact, have the possibility of obtaining initiation; if this is not so in fact, it is solely due to the present state of the Western world, and, in this regard, the disappearance of the conscious elite and the absence of adequate initiatory organizations to receive it appear as two closely linked facts, correlative in a way, without perhaps even needing to ask which one

could have been a consequence of the other. But, on the other hand, it is evident that initiatory organizations which would be truly and fully what they should be, and not simply more or less degenerate vestiges of what once was, could only be reformed if they found elements possessing not only the necessary initial aptitude, but also the effective dispositions determined by the awareness of this aptitude, for it is primarily up to them to "aspire" to initiation, and it would be to reverse the relationship to think that initiation should come to them independently of this aspiration. This is why the reconstitution of the elite—by which we mean the elite conscious of its potential within the initiatory order, even though this potential may remain undeveloped until traditional affiliation is achieved—is the primary condition upon which everything else depends, just as the presence of pre-prepared materials is indispensable for the construction of a building, although these materials can obviously only fulfill their purpose once they have found their place within the building itself.

Assuming that initiation has indeed been attained by those who belong to the elite, it will still be necessary to consider, for each of them, the possibility of progressing further or less, of attaining possession of this or that degree, according to the extent of their own particular potential. Therefore, for the passage from one degree to another, it will be necessary to consider what could be called an elite within the elite itself, and it is in this sense that some have spoken of the "elite of the elite." In other words, one can envision successive "elections," increasingly restricted in the number of individuals involved, always operating "from above" and following the same principle, and corresponding, in short, to the different degrees of the initiatory hierarchy[1]. Thus, step by step, one can reach the supreme "election," that which refers to the "adeptship," that is, to the fulfillment of the ultimate goal of all initiation; and, consequently, the "elect" in the fullest sense of the word, the one who could be called the "perfect elect," will be the one who achieves the realization of the "Supreme Identity"[2].

1 It is in this sense that the word chosen is found, for example, in the designation of certain higher degrees of various Masonic rites, which, of course, certainly does not mean that there has always been a real awareness of its meaning and all that it implies.

2 In Islamic tradition, El-Mustafa, "the Chosen One", is one of the names of the Prophet; it therefore

After these considerations, which we believe sufficient to clarify the question of the elite and to at least give a glimpse of all that it truly entails, we will return to the remarks we made at the beginning, and we will add this: it is certainly impossible to prevent the misuse of any word, “elite” as well as any other; and, if this misuse were to force us to avoid its use, we do not see what terms would ultimately remain at our disposal. But, moreover, we must especially reclaim those words which, prior to any profane distortion, have been, in a way, consecrated by traditional usage, and this is indeed the case here; as “technical terms,” they are linked in a certain way to initiatory symbolism itself, and it is not because laypeople sometimes seize upon a symbol they are incapable of understanding, distort its meaning, and make an illegitimate application of it, that this symbol ceases to be in itself what it truly is.

---

effectively refers to him as Universal Man.

SOME ASPECTS OF THE SYMBOLISM OF THE FISH

The symbolism of the fish, which is to be found in numerous traditional forms, including Christianity, is exceedingly complex and has many aspects which need to be clearly distinguished one from another. As to the earliest origins of this symbol, it seems to be of Nordic or even Hyperborean provenance. Its presence has in fact been verified in North Germany and in Scandinavia[1], and in these regions it is in all likelihood nearer its starting-point than in Central Asia where doubtless it was brought by the great current which, issuing directly from the Primordial Tradition, was later to give birth to the doctrines of India and Persia. It is to be noted moreover, generally speaking, that certain aquatic animals figure above all in the symbolism of Northern peoples: to give just one example, the octopus is particularly widespread among the Scandinavians and the Celts, and is also found in archaic Greece as one of the chief motifs in Mycenian ornamentation.[2] Another fact which bears out these considerations is that in India the manifestation in the form of the fish (Matsya-avatara) is held to be the first of all the manifestations of Vishnu,[3] the one which marks the very beginning of the present cycle, and that it is thus directly related to the starting-point of the Primordial Tradition. It must not be forgotten, in this connection, that Vishnu represents the divine Principle especially in its world-preserving aspect. This function comes very close to that of Saviour, which is, more precisely, a particular instance of the wider function of Preserver; and it is truly as Saviour that Vishnu appears in some of his manifestations which correspond to phases of crisis in the history of the

1 Cf. L Charbonneau-Lassay, 'Le Poisson' in Regnabit, December 1926

2 The arms of the octopus are generally straight in the Scandinavian figurations, while they are wound in spirals in Mycenian ornaments. In the latter, one also sees very frequently the swastika, or figures that are manifestly derived from it. The symbol of the octopus relates to the zodiacal sign of Cancer, which corresponds to the summer solstice and to the 'depth of the Waters'. It is easy to understand from this that it could sometimes have been taken in a malefic sense, the summer solstice being the Janua Inferni.

3 We must call attention to the fact that we do not say 'incarnations', as is commonly done in the West, for the word is quite inexact. The proper sense of the word avatara is 'descent' of the divine Principle into the manifested world.

world.[4] Now the idea of the Saviour is also explicitly attached to the Christian symbolism of the fish, for the last letter ofthe Greek Ichthus is interpreted as the initial of Soter.[5] Doubtless there is nothing surprising in this, seeing that it has to do with Christ; but there are none the less emblems which allude more directly to certain of his other attributes, and which do not formally express the function of 'Saviour'.

In the form of the fish, at the end of the Maha-Yuga which precedes our own, Vishnu appears to Satyavrata[6] who is to become, under the name Vaivasvata,[7] the Manu or Legislator of the present cycle. He announces to him that the world is going to be destroyed by flood, and he orders him to construct an ark in which the seeds of the future world are to be enclosed. Then, in this very same form, he himself guides the ark over the waters during the cataclysm; and this representation of the ark guided by the divine fish is all the more remarkable for having its equivalent also in Christian symbolism.[8] The Matsya-avatara has yet another aspect which is particularly worthy of note: after the cataclysm, that is at the beginning of the present Maha-Yuga, he brings mankind the Veda, which must be understood, according to the etymological signification of the word (derived from the root vid, to know), as the Science of sciences, or Sacred Knowledge in its entirety. This is a

^very clear allusion to the primordial Revelation, or to the 'non-human' origin of Tradition. It is said that the Veda subsists perpetually, being in

4 Let us also note in this connection that the last manifestation, the Kalki-avatara, 'He who is mounted on the white horse', and who must come at the end of this cycle, is described in the Purünas in terms rigorously identical to those found in the Apocalypse, where they relate to the 'second coming' of Christ.

5 When the fish is taken as the symbol of Christ, its Greek name, Ichthus, is considered as formed by the initial letters of the words Iesous Christos Theou Uios Soter (Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour).

6 This names signifies, literally, 'dedicated to the Truth'; and this idea of the "Truth' is to be found in the designation of Satya-Yuga, the first of the four ages into which the Maha-Yuga is divided. One may note also the similarity of the word Satya with the name Saturn, considered in Western antiquity precisely as the regent of the Golden Age; and in the Hindu tradition, the sphere of Saturn is called Satya-Loka.

7 Issued from Vivasvat, one of the twelve Adityas who are regarded as so many forms of the Sun, in correspondence with the twelve signs of the Zodiac, and of whom it is said that they must appear simultaneously at the end of the cycle.

8 Charbonneau-Lassay, in the study mentioned above, cites 'the pontifical ornament decorated with embroidered figures which enclose the remains of the Lombard bishop of the eighth or ninth century, and on which is seen a barque carried by a fish, image of Christ supporting the Church'. Now. the ark has often been regarded as a figure of the Church, just as the barque (which, in ancient times was, with the keys, one of the emblems of Janus; cf., Autorité spirituelle et pouvoir temporelle, ch. 8). It is this one and the same idea that we find expressed here both in Hindu and Christian symbolism.

itself prior to all the worlds; but it is as if hidden or enveloped during the cosmic cataclysms which separate the different cycles, after which it must be manifested anew. The affirmation of the perpetuity of the Veda, moreover, is directly related to the cosmological theory of the primordiality of sound among the sensible qualities (as the quality that belongs to ether, akasha, which is the first of the elements).[9] And this theory is ultimately the same as what other traditions express in speaking of creation by the Word. The primordial sound is this Divine Word by which, according to the first chapter of the Hebrew Genesis, all things have been made.'[10] This is why it is said that the Rishis or the Sages of the earliest times 'heard' the Veda. Revelation, being like creation itself a work of the Word, is strictly speaking an 'audition' for him who receives it; and the term which denotes it is shruti, which means literally 'that which is heard'.[11]

During the cataclysm that separates this Maha-Yuga from the previous one, the Veda was enclosed in a state of envelopment in the conch (shankha), which is one of the chief attributes of Vishnu. The conch is in fact held to contain the imperishable primordial sound (akshara), that is the monosyllable Om, which is par excellence the name of the manifested Word in the three worlds while being at the same time, by another correspondence of its three elements or matras, the essence of the triple Veda.[12]

Like Vishnu in India-and also under the form of a fish-the Chaldean Oannés (whom some have regarded expressly as a figure of the Christ)[13] also teaches the primordial doctrine to men, a striking example of the unity existing between traditions that are in appearance most different-a unity which would remain inexplicable if we did not admit their derivation from a common source. The symbolism of Oannés or of

9 Cf., our study of 'La Théorie hindoue des cinq éléments', in Etudes Traditionnelles, August-September, 1935.

10 Cf, also the beginning of the Gospel according to St John.

11 On the distinction between shruti and smriti and on their relationships, see Man and his Becoming according to the Vedanta, Ch. 1.

12 On the presence of this same ideogram AVM in ancient Christian symbolism, cf., The King of the World, Ch. 4.

13 In this connection it is interesting to note that the head of the fish, which gave its form to the head-dress of the priests of Oannés, is also the form of the mitre of Christian bishops.

Dagon seems moreover to be not only that of the fish in general, but to be connected more especially with that of the dolphin which with the Greeks was related to the cult of Apollo[14] and had given its name to Delphi; and it is very significant that it was formally recognised that this cult came from the Hyperboreans. The connection between Oannés and the dolphin (which, on the contrary, is not specifically indicated in the manifestation of Vishnu), is above all implicit in the close connection between the symbol of the dolphin and that of the 'Woman of the sea' (Aphrodite Anadyomene of the Greeks).[15] It is she, under diverse names such as Ishtar, Atergatis and Dercéto, who appears as the consort of Oannés or of his equivalents, that is, as a complementary aspect of the same principle, its Shakti,[16] as the Hindu tradition would call her. This is the 'Lady of the Lotus' (Ishtar, like Esther in Hebrew, means 'lotus', and sometimes also 'lily', two flowers which often replace one another in symbolism),[17] like the Kwan-yin of the Far East, who in one of her forms is also the 'Goddess of the depths of the sea'.

To complete these remarks, we will add that the figure of the Babylonian Ea, the 'Lord of the Deep', represented as half-goat and half-fish[18], is identical with that of the sign Capricorn in the Zodiac and may even have been its prototype. Now it is important to recall in this respect that in the annual cycle the sign of Capricorn corresponds to the winter solstice. The Makara which, in the Hindu zodiac, takes the place of Capricorn, is not unlike the dolphin. The symbolic opposition between the dolphin and the octopus must therefore be brought back to the opposition of the two solstitial signs of Capricorn and Cancer (in India Cancer is represented by the crab) or the Gates of Heaven and

14 It is this which explains the connection of the dolphin symbol with the idea of light (cf.. L Charbonneau-Lassay, 'Le Dauphin et le crustacé' in Regnabit, January 1927. and in Bestiaire du Christ, ch. 98, 5). Also to be noted is the function attributed by the ancients to the dolphin as saviour of the shipwrecked, of which the legend of Arion offers one of the best known examples.

15 This 'Woman of the sea' must not be confused with the mermaid, though she may sometimes be represented by a similar form.

16 The Dea Syra is strictly speaking the 'solar Goddess', just as the primeval Syria is the 'Land of the Sun', as we have already explained, its name being identical with Surya, the Sanskrit name for the Sun.

17 In Hebrew, the two names Esther and Sushana have the same meaning and, moreover, they are numerically equivalent: both add up to 661. and the additions before each of them, of the letter he, which signifies the definite article of which the value is 5, brings the number to 666, from which some have not failed to draw more or less fantastic deductions; for our part, we mention this only as a mere curiosity.

18 Moreover Ea holds before him-like the Egyptian scarab-a ball which represents the World Egg.

Hell, Janua Caeli and Janua Inferni[19] and this also explains why these same two animals are found associated in certain cases, for example under the tripod of Delphi and under the feet of the coursers that draw the solar chariot, as indicating the two extreme points reached by the Sun in its annual march. It is important not to confuse the two signs in question with another sign, that of Pisces, the symbolism of which is different and must be related exclusively to that of the fish in general, especially in its connection with the idea of the 'principle of life' and of 'fertility; (above all in the spiritual sense, like 'posterity' in the traditional language of the Far East). These are other aspects which can likewise be related to the Word, but which must none the less be distinguished clearly from those which manifest it, as we have seen, under its two attributes of Revealer and Saviour.

19 The function of the dolphin as guide of sanctified souls towards the 'Islands of the Blessed' also refers obviously to the Janua Carli.